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ABSTRACT

Language variation, be it foreign or dialect, receives little tolerance and understanding by the general public. Thus, there are two major challenges for the decade of the 1980s in language arts instruction. The first is for teachers to become thoroughly informed about the nature of language and its role in our society. A knowledge of language variation provides teachers with useful information on which to base instructional decisions. For example, a teacher knowledgeable about black vernacular English would be able to recognize the difference between a dialect shift and a decoding error as a child reads. Another aspect of the influence of language on learning is the way students pronounce their words and the manner in which their teachers may respond attitudinally. Moreover, if teachers were knowledgeable about language, they could incorporate this information into the curriculum because it is important for students to know and understand the nature and functions of language in the various facets of everyday communication. The second challenge is for publishers to produce textbooks that take into account language variation in a manner that recognizes American society as one that ideally respects diversity but realistically expects unity. (HOD)

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LANGUAGE VARIATION AND PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION

vis a vis

JELLY BEANS AND DESIGNER GENES

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The decade of the 80's seems preoccupied with talk of jelly beans and designer genes* with the former symbolic of politics and the latter symbolic of science. What they both seem to have in common is that they focus on human nature and the age old argument about nature vs nurture, i.e., to what degree are people born a "certain way" as compared to what degree environment forms them a certain way.

It is well documented by the years of the Great Society that those who believe in changing society place their money on environment. The War on Poverty was essentially an assault on environment with a myriad of social and educational programs designed to help "disadvantaged" citizens gain a competitively more viable access to the opportunities of our society.

It now seems apparent that in the forthcoming years of the Fiscally Responsible Society, those who believe in biology have control and there is now an assault on social and educational programs because they have been judged ineffective, even detrimental, for the well being of our citizens. Simply stated, man has to seek and he shall find, sow and he shall reap. It is he to the measure of his own ability and motivation that will determine his fate.

*The credit for this phrase belongs to syndicated columnist Ellen Goodman.

The reason that our society has these periodic great shifts in national political sociology and psychology is the fact that nobody really knows how much we are a product of our genes or of our culture. It is most likely that we are a combination of both and truth lies somewhere in between these two shapers of human existence. The argument, however, is fascinating because it is often one more of politics than science.

For example, the bilingual cause in this country, although begun and argued for as an academically humane program, is now such an issue. In response to the question, "Is there too much emphasis on bilingualism?", readers of the Nation's Business (December, 1980) say yes by a margin of twenty to one. The respondents included some "heavy" individuals from business and industry and the following representative statements illustrate their viewpoints.

> Our society has enough divisive forces already; language differentiation should not be another.
>
> Don Lundgren,
> director of corporate personnel development at the Scott Paper Company, Philadelphia

> We should encourage all Americans - children and adults - to learn English to the best of their abilities. My company wants employees with a good grasp of English. A common language is one

> of our country's greatest assets. Bilingualism that diminishes the drive for a common language is counter-productive.
>
> Wm. L. Matthaei
> executive vice-president
> for marketing at the Roman
> Meal Company, Tacoma, Washington

And the following statement, most likely written satirically, reminds us of the issue of dialect variation and learning to read which received national media attention via the Ann Arbor Black English court case during the 1979-80 school year.

> If I ever move above the Mason - Dixon line, maybe I should demand that my children be taught a class in 'how to speak Southern' so they won't lose part of their cultural heritage.
>
> Robt D. Brueckner,
> manager of information
> systems for Dorsey
> Trailers, Inc., Elba, Alabama

The insight we receive from these kinds of responses is that language variation, be it foreign or dialect, receives little tolerance and understanding by the general public. As a result, public opinion on this issue is making it politically expedient for the new Federal Administration to no longer actively support nor advocate bilingual programs; its course seems one of benign neglect. However, before one begins to acrimoniously attack the presumed benighted behavior of those who have chosen this new course, let us remember that many in government who vigorously support bilingualism do not ignore the voter support of those

who would presumably realize benefits from it.

So why argue? Why not leave such debate to the politicians and their "groupies" and get on with some data based scientific recommendations for the issues confronting education generally and the language arts specifically? Unfortunately, scientific objectivity can often be as trendy as Madison Ave. It is not difficult for us to pick and choose from among scientific research based ideas to support our beliefs about a certain educational issue because scientists themselves often advocate one or another position as it fits their personal socio-political values. This seems especially applicable in the social sciences and education. As a result, it is challenging for us to find viable cause and effect dicta that we can apply to some of our long standing issues in education, e.g., teaching <u>all</u> children to read at a functionally literate level let alone grade level. (The Federal Government defines functional literacy as reading at the fifth grade level. Let us hope that the new administration does not apply the principle of "downsizing" to this aspect of our lives.)

However, the foregoing discussion does not mean that we cease our quest for improved curriculum and instruction as it pertains to teaching children to read as well as to apply this skill to other school subjects. There exists valuable research data upon which language arts teacher educators and textbook publishers can base their syllabi and textbooks but they need to temper their socio-political polemics and use the information

that is both practical and applicable from a realistic rather than a utopian perspective. (One good source for such information is the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana.)

In the last twenty years, the disciplines of linguistics, psychology, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics have provided significant and educationally applicable information about the nature of language, the process of human communication, the process of language acquisition, the nature of dialectal language variation, the sociological effects of language diversity on human interaction, and the educational effects of language diversity on achievement in school. Not much of this information has been incorporated in a systematic broad-based manner in our teacher education programs (undergraduate, graduate, or inservice)and even less has been incorporated into the content of our language arts curricula.

For example, most teachers and textbooks still treat dialects, usage, and semantics as "when and if we have time projects" outside the realm of the regular program. If we are ever to have a knowledgeable and understanding society regarding language, its education must occur in the classroom and not in the courtroom nor legislative chambers. New knowledge about language is as important as the new math and the new science. These disciplines constantly revise their textbooks and train their teachers regarding new uses and discoveries concerning their content.

Thus, the following illustrative guidelines focus on some of the important information about language that is currently well documented but not generally known or understood by students, teachers, and the general public. This information should be an integral part of the content of our language arts textbooks, Kindergarten thru graduate school.

1. All languages, if they are living languages, change with time.

2. Any human infant exposed to human language and not suffering from a physical, mental, or emotional handicap will learn that language.

3. The relationship between words in a language and their referents is abritrary; analogic change, borrowing, and metaphor influence this relationship.

4. Concepts which can be expressed in one dialect of a language can be expressed in another dialect of that language.

5. No dialect of a language is inherently more elegant, more logical, more correct, or more crucial than any other dialect of the language but situation and purpose relative to a specific communication act may require a certain form of the language.

6. Everyone speaks some dialect of a language but most modern languages have a single written standard.

7. The grammatical differences among the dialects of English are very small compared to what those dialects share.

8. The few grammatical differences among dialects are the result of historical, geographical, and social accident, not of any intrinsically superior logic, expressiveness, or intellectual worth.

9. The linguistically minor grammatical differences between certain dialects and standard English not so inexplicably carry great social weight.

10. If speakers of non-standard dialects do not learn to write coherently or clearly, it may be a consequence not of a few distinctive dialect features, but of teachers' failure to take into account what is known about the influence of dialect within the school environment.

Competent teachers can profit from this kind of knowledge in two major ways: (1) it provides useful information on which they may rely when making instructional decisions for students who may be language variant speakers; (2) it provides subject matter information about the nature and functions of language in its various facets of everyday human communication and interpersonal relations which they can teach their students.

Regarding point one, a teacher knowledgeable about black vernacular English would be able to recognize the difference between a dialect shift and a decoding error as a child might read the following sentence as:

"This (*d* *is*) a story about two boy *s*
and how *d* they like to walk on
a *trial* trail in the wood *s*."

In this example, the pronunciation of *th* as *d*, the omission of the linking verb *is*, and the omission of the plural marker *s* are all features of black vernacular English. Research regarding the reading process shows that dialect speakers render standard English print into their dialect pattern; this is known as a dialect shift. Also as part of this example, *trial* is not a dialect rendering of *trial* but is a reading decoding error.

This relates to the teaching of reading as follows. Dialect shifts do not ordinarily affect meaning i.e., the students comprehend what they read and the teacher can easily check their comprehension by asking them questions. If students understand what they read, then they know how to read and the teacher should not spend time during reading instruction on dialect shifts as if they were decoding errors. However, if a dialect shift does cause a loss of meaning as can happen if, for example, *walked* is rendered as *walk* in a particular sentence and the student does not grasp that the event is past time, then the teacher should provide appropriate instruction to clarify the meaning of the sentence as he or she would do for *trail* read as *trial* in our example. The crucial issue in this instructional situation is whether or not the students understand the meaning of what they read. The matter of teaching the syntax of standard English is an issue of language instruction and should occur during the time allotted for it in the curriculum rather than taking time away from reading instruction.

Another aspect of the influence of language on learning is the way students pronounce their words and the manner in which their teachers may respond attitudinally, i.e., positively or negatively. New England speech patterns (pahk, cah, pahtee) usually receive an accepting response as they represent the cradle of democracy, the Founding Fathers, the culture and refinement of the East. The speech patterns of the South (ast,

git, et, fixin, hep) often receive a reserved acceptance especially as these may seem to represent the poor, the uneducated, the uncultured. Or the speech patterns of an ethnic group such as the Polish-American (tick, tin, dat, dose) receive a negative response because these may seem to represent the unassimilated laborer, the ethnocentric adherent of a foreign (un-American) culture and tradition. In this last category we may generally include the hyphenated Americans that descend from Eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America, and South America. Interestingly, those who descend from Western Europe find that their speech patterns are quite acceptable as, for example, advertisers use French accented, Swedish accented, and British English to sell products to the middle and upper classes. A well known and influential advisor to Presidents never found a strong German accent a detriment to his career. No doubt this is a result of the dominance that Anglo Saxon culture has in American society. It seems obvious that language variation being understood and accepted is more a matter of which racial, ethnic, or social class group is doing the speaking than it is of language variation per se.

The human tragedy of this uneven, misinformed, and illogical response to language variation is that simply by the sound of their speech, some people are judged positively and others are judged negatively. This can be extremely serious when it occurs in school. Called the Pygmalion effect, research in teacher expectancy demonstrates that teachers can unconsciously have low expectations for their students' ability to learn based on the students'

use of the language. This seems especially applicable to students who speak one of the dialects that generally elicit negative responses in our society. Language knowledgeable teachers, however, seem not to fall victim to this kind of benighted behavior.

Moreover, if teachers are knowledgeable about language, they can incorporate this information into the curriculum because it is important for students to know and understand the nature and functions of language in the various facets of everday communication. What students need to learn is that either of the following two extremes regarding language are unacceptable.

1. There is one best correct form of the language and any variation is error and always socially unacceptable;

2. Because all dialectal forms of language are co-equal, there is no need to learn a standard form.

The responsible position is for teachers to instruct students about the nature of language as discussed previously and to help them learn to use the standard English expected of persons who would participate in the institutional life of our society, particularly as it applies to writing. It would be very beneficial to students if they had teachers able to do this. It would be very beneficial to teachers if they had textbooks that enabled them to teach this important information.

Thus, there are two major challenges for the decade of the 80's in language arts instruction. One is for teachers to become thoroughly informed about the nature of language and its role in our society. The second is for publishers to produce textbooks that take into account language variation in a manner that recognizes American society as one that ideally respects diversity but

realistically expects unity. It is not inconsistent to respect language differences but also to expect a standard language.

As textbook publishers address this challenge in our competitive profit motive society, they will need the support of language knowledgeable teachers as they weigh and balance various factors before placing their "bets" on specific programs that they hope will satisfy various constituencies such as academicians, teachers, students, parents, the moral majority, and womens' lib that often determine the success or failure of textbooks insofar as they are accepted and purchased for use in our nation's classrooms. For both teachers and publishers this is not an enviable task. Perhaps the following citation from Ecclesiastes puts their predicament into a realistic perspective.

> "I returned and saw under the sun,
> that the race is not to the swift,
> nor the battle to the strong,
> neither yet bread to the wise, not
> yet riches to men of understanding,
> nor yet favor to men of skill; but
> time and chance happeneth to them
> all."

Let us hope that the swift, strong, wise, understanding, and skillful among teachers and publishers will prevail over time and chance.